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Grounding the New Farmer

Agriculture today is dominated by large corporations that can mass-produce foods with high speed and high yield. Despite this, people are steadily becoming more aware of the plentiful benefits of the small, sustainably-focused farm. Small farms support their local community and can offer fresher foods that have traveled less distance. They have potential for education and community involvement, and are an excellent way to utilize otherwise empty space in cities and suburbs. Their more manageable size allows the independent farmer to be more conscious of the ethics of their cultivation practices, and make organic and naturally-certified weeding more feasible. For these reasons, the small farm model of agriculture exhibits great potential for moving to a more sustainable system of food production. The new, young farmer is key to this move towards sustainable small farms. As the generational gap between the established and new farmer grows, the number of retiring farmers does as well. The need to educate and enable people who are just starting out is therefore becoming increasingly important. These young farmers face challenges unique to their generation; primarily among them is the need for land. If the price of land remains exorbitantly out of reach and if all undeveloped land continues to be grabbed up and turned into housing developments, then even with the appropriate knowledge and training the potential new farmer stands no chance. Young people are the future of the world's food. If that future is to be reached sustainably and in an environmentally safe way, then the

forces of public interest and government policy need to throw their weight behind the needs of the new farmer.

In the past decade, organic food has boomed. According to the Organic Trade Association, from 1990 to 2010, the U.S. organic industries saw sales rise from \$1 billion to \$26.7 billion, with an increase of 7.7% in sales from 2009 to 2010 (“Industry Statistics” 2011). More recently, however, the push towards local food has also grown in strength, as the definition of “sustainable food” has evolved to exclude products that travel exorbitant distances to reach consumers. University of Missouri Professor John Ikerd goes so far as to call the trend towards local food the “new organic,” (“The New Farm” 2007). In May 2010, the USDA’s Economic Research Service published a report detailing trends in local food systems. Using the term “direct-to-consumer” to describe local selling methods such as farm stands, farmers markets, and CSA’s, the report summary reached some of the following conclusions:

- “Direct-to-consumer marketing amounted to \$1.2 billion in current dollar sales in 2007, according to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, compared with \$551 million in 1997.
- “Direct-to-consumer sales accounted for 0.4 percent of total agricultural sales in 2007, up from 0.3 percent in 1997.
- “The number of farmers’ markets rose to 5,274 in 2009, up from 2,756 in 1998 and 1,755 in 1994, according to USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service.
- “In 2005, there were 1,144 community-supported agriculture organizations, up from 400 in 2001 and 2 in 1986.”

These statistics highlight that local food is a small but quickly growing niche in America’s food system, and a feature of produce that consumers are starting to demand. As this demand rises, farmers are continuing to meet it with a growing passion for the

environmental and ethical concerns of sustainable agriculture. Many of these farmers come not from established farming backgrounds, but are, rather, a generation of young, new farmers. In a survey by the National Young Farmer's Coalition, in which the majority of participants were under 34 years old, 78% reported that they were from non-farming backgrounds (Lusher Shute 2011). One such farmer, Celine Manekin, accredits increased education about local foods to the small but steady movement towards smaller farms (2011). Pennsylvania farmer Margaret Schlass expressed similar sentiments, saying that the "research, books, documentaries exposing the modern industrial food machine has helped in the revitalization of the viability of small farms" (2011). These next-generation farmers are one of the driving forces behind the building push towards sustainable food.

Margaret Schlass started Valencia, PA's One Woman Farm in 2008, at the age of 23. Her farm is a prime example of the small, environmentally-conscious local farms that continue to spring up in increasing numbers. The daughter of a lawyer and a businessman, Margaret became interested in farming after graduating from college, and moved on to work on two CSA farms before starting her own. This practical experience, she says, gave her most of her training. Margaret tackled the land question through a family friend, with whom she now has a renewable lease. It is usually through these personal relationships, she says, that she has known fellow aspiring farmers to find land. Celine Manekin is another young farmer and 2010 graduate of the University of Maryland, who founded her Bean Stalk Farm this year. Unlike Margaret's experience, Celine located land to farm by driving around and looking for land that she felt would be suitable. "When I found a piece of land," she said in an email interview, "I would leave a letter in the mailbox asking if the resident would be interested in allowing me to farm their property. I got a couple

responses and chose the land that worked best for my needs” (2011). Other ways she has seen farmers finding their land, she says, is through word of mouth in the farming community, and through posting Craigslist ads (2011). These varied experiences and methods are indicative of the new farmer’s experience acquiring land. As inheriting or owning is impossible for many of these entrepreneurs, word of mouth and creativity in finding landlords has become increasingly important. It is by no means a simple task; in a blog post on the National Young Farmers’ Coalition website, finding a stable place to farm is described as being one of the most difficult challenges a new farmer faces (Morford 2011).

Margaret describes the problem of land access as being due its “inordinate purchase price,” and its accelerating disappearance (2011). Just this year, farmland values in a number of Western and Midwestern states rose by 25%, in what the Huffington Post reports is the most extreme annual rise in 30 years (Funk 2011). The Post reports that while this is a sign of a strong farming economy, it also hails an increase in the cost of farming that will “definitely make it harder for young people to get into farming” (Funk 2011). Though land seems limitless, this skyrocketing capital barrier has combined with a plummeting availability of land. For years, farmland has been bought out and converted into residential plans and shopping centers, and the new establishments have been given names like “Meadow Acres,” after the farm that once stood there. The rate of this in recent years, however, has been much faster than before. In Utah, for example, available land fell by 145,600 acres between 1982 and 1992; 24,000 acres developed in that period was prime farmland (Zollinger 2002). In a report by the National Young Farmer’s Coalition, farmers surveyed listed lack of capital—as well as a need for loans and credit—as the number one challenge faced, and access to land as the second (Lusher Shute 2011). The

report also noted that 88% of the people who own farmland are not farmers, but “so-called absentee landowners [who] own 40 percent of the nation’s farmland” (Lusher Shute 2011). It comes as no surprise, then, that the report found it 70 percent more probable that farmers under age 30 would rent land. (Lusher Shute 2011). This need for accessible, affordable land is a massive problem in the lives of new farmers, and is a symptom of an agricultural economy that is not focused on sustainability.

Land use problems plague established farmers, as well. In many cases, it could be said that farming careers skipped a generation: the children of farmers now in their late fifties and sixties, in particular, deviated from the family business to different occupations. Between the older generation and the new, up-and-coming one, therefore, is a gap, which in many cases has left older and retiring farmers with no heirs to their businesses. Since the average age of the American farmer is 57, and over one-fourth are above 65, this is a serious problem (“If You Eat and Live in America 2011”). With no one to continue working, these family farms have nowhere to go. Since over half of farmland in the U.S. is owned by farmers age 55 and above, this leaves ownership of an estimated 400 million acres of land to be transferred by 2030 (“Beginning Farmers and U.S. Agriculture”; Lusher Shute 2011). In cases with no children eager to take over, and urban development already intruding, this transfer of ownership often results in the land being sold for non-agricultural uses (Zollinger 2002). Thus, as farmers get too old to continue working, their farms tend to lie fallow or to be sold, and the problem of decreasing farmland is worsened. This dilemma is illustrated by Simon’s Farm in Gibsonia, Pennsylvania. Although it is still called Simon’s Farm, its generous tracts of land are now largely fallow; all that is still operated is the produce stand, for which vegetables are brought in from outside, often non-local sources to

be sold. The cause is typical of family farms: Mr. and Mrs. Simon founded the farm. Their son grew up to become an engineer, and Mr. and Mrs. Simon died. While their son still keeps the farm stand running, he has his own career and family, and lacks the time to run a farm. As a result, huge fields of perfectly good farmland lie untouched, despite the numerous young farmers in search of land to utilize.

This generational gap represents a loss of connection between the most integral participants in American agriculture. It results in wasted land, as older generations find themselves unable to farm and in need of retirement, and younger generations find themselves without land. It also, however, results in a terrible loss of knowledge. As the older generation of farmers dies, they take with them their expansive knowledge of farming, often without passing it on to younger generations. This leaves young farmers without that basic resource. Although the generations sometimes disagree, Margaret said, she has found her predecessors to be great resources in terms of “equipment, soils, managing unwanted wildlife, and the great old-time skills” (2011). She stressed the importance of communication between the generations, saying “it is important for middle age farmers to have close contact with young and beginning farmers to keep an open dialogue about techniques and developments” (2011 Email). Through such communication, both groups benefit. Similarly, there are programs springing up to bridge the gap on the land use level. Twenty-two states participate in Farm Link programs, which connect retiring farmers or landowners looking to lease or sell available land with new farmers who are without farms. In this way, both problems of fallow, unused land and of landless farmers are addressed. On its website, California Farm Link lists its accomplishments for this year, which include 35 instances of linking farmers to land, 15 links to loans, guiding

193 purchases and leases, and helping 130 farmers with financial planning (2011). On its website, the Connecticut Farm Link program outlines the problem it aims to solve thusly: “Farmland is irreplaceable. There is a new generation of young farmers who want to be tomorrow’s Stewards of the Land. But they do not have land to work” (“Welcome to Connecticut Farm Link Program”). Programs other than Farm Link exist as well, including the Land Stewardship Project’s Clearinghouse listings, Landshare Colorado, and AgriSeek (“Finding Land to Farm”). These resources, though underfunded, work to bridge the needless gap between land needed and land used in small U.S. farming, and create interaction between the generations.

There has also been a notable increase in the number of programs designed to educate both non-farmers and prospective farmers about farming. This is an important step because, as Celine said, “There is a disconnect between where our food currently comes from and how it is grown” (2011). By bringing programs about farming and creating schoolyard gardens, Celine feels that the next generation will have a much better understanding of food and its source. Hopefully, she says, it will inspire that next generation to start their own farms. By doing this, there may even be a more substantial amount of new farmers in the generations to come than those marching into the profession currently. A report by the USDA’s Economic Research Service found that in 2009, the number of farm to school programs was at 2,095—an increase from 400 in 2004, and only 2 in 1997 (Martinez 2010). These programs focus on bringing local and healthy food into school cafeterias, and “promote relationships schools and farms can foster over time” (Martinez 2010). Education for adults trying to break into the business of farming has become more available, as well. In the young farmer’s coalition report, respondents listed

apprenticeships as the number one most useful thing available to learning about farming (Lusher Shute 2011). They also listed college and university training, as well as non-profit training (Lusher Shute 2011). Aside from classes while at UMD, working on other farms, and attending workshops, Celine listed one of the resources she found most valuable as the New Farmer Training Program (2011). As a trainee, she worked alongside experienced farmers once a week while working on her own farm the other days—this allowed her to come to someone experienced with questions as they arose on her own farm (2011). Programs like these are integral to educating people about farming, now that the gap in traditional educators is so large, and as older farmers retire.

To address the climbing purchase price of land and its growing scarcity, many non-governmental organizations have formed to assist farmers. These include organizations like The Carrot Project, The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, and the Organic Farming Research Foundation. The Carrot Project serves farmers of the Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, and the Greater Berkshires areas with accessible loans, and also organizes microloans with potential investors (The Carrot Project). The Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project offers grants that fund Appalachian Grown certified farmers by funding half of the farmer's advertising and publicity costs ("Grants"). The Organic Farming Research Foundation focuses on supporting the growth of useful scientific information to benefit organic agriculture ("About OFRF"). The Farm Credit System is also a useful resource; with branches across the country, the Farm Credit System consists of 90 loan Associations, and has collectively loaned "\$7.7 billion in new loans to young farmers, \$12 billion in new loans to beginning farmers, and \$14.2 billion in new loans to small farmers" in 2008 (Matteson). There are also numerous informative resources that provide

instruction on financial management and the creation of strategies through business plans. These and the farm loan and grant programs support small farmers who otherwise struggle with credit and barriers to receiving loans.

Governmental organizations also provide support for farmers. A prominent such organization is the USDA's Farming Service Agency. The FSA also provides specific need-based loans. These include Rural Youth Loans, which can range up to \$5,000 for applicants ages ten through twenty, and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers Loans, which aids individuals who have experienced "racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice" ("Rural Youth Loans" 2008; "Socially Disadvantaged" 2011). In their 2011 report, the National Young Farmer's Coalition described FSA loans as being "absolutely essential," because the risks inherent in farming make private donor hesitant (Lusher Shute). However, the Coalition said, a farmer must first be rejected by non-FSA lenders before they qualify for FSA, earning FSA the name "the lender of last resort" (Lusher Shute 2011). Other concerns were raised, as well. These included impractically long response times to receive applicant acceptance or rejection and to receive payment, irregular knowledge of small farmer loans by FSA employees, and little internal motivation for FSA officers to engage farmers who need small loans as opposed to loans ranging into the hundreds of thousands of dollars (Lusher Shute 2011).

Requirements can get tricky, as well. To apply for farm ownership assistance, "FSA requires that farmers have at least three years of farm managerial experience, but 10 or fewer years of overall experience, to qualify as a beginning farmer" (Lusher Shute 2011). This disqualifies many farmers. Said one farmer surveyed by the report, "FSA Beginning Farmer Loan program can be great if you have a strong business plan, good luck, and one or two off-farm incomes to mitigate risk" (Lusher Shute 2011). These restrictions are simply not

viable for the small, young farmer, and make FSA programs unhelpful in many instances. For the FSA to truly help young farmers, it will have to undergo an overhaul of its current approach.

The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) is a governmental program that has, in fact, been working very well. The program was made official in the 2008 farm bill, and according to the USDA's website, "focuses on providing financial and entrepreneurial training, mentoring, and apprenticeship programs, as well as 'land link' programs that connect retiring with new farmers ... BFRDP grants have a term of 3 years and cannot exceed \$250,000 a year" ("BFRDP" 2010). The National Young Farmer's Coalition supports this program, and recommends its continuation and augmentation (Lusher Shute 2011). A new bill recently proposed to Congress is also receiving support. If passed, the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act (BFROA) of 2011 would advance current credit programs, "encourage innovative strategies for land transfer and farm entry," and enact conservation programs ("If You Eat and Live in America" 2011). Legislation like this is essential for helping young farmers to overcome the barriers of decreasing land availability and the inaccessibility of its mounting costs.

Young, motivated, and with a passion for environmental sustainability: farmers like Margaret Schlass and Celine Manekin are coming from all over the country increasing numbers. They are meeting an increasing demand for local food, and filling the gap left by the retiring generation. In a country where, despite this local food trend, food is controlled mainly by multi-national corporations with a great deal of power and little regard for the environment, farmers like these are important. The challenges they meet, however, often seem insurmountable. The basic requirements of start-up capital and land are becoming

harder to find due to rising land prices and falling land availability. While private and non-profit organizations serve these needs, they are too few and far between to fully fix the problem, and while agencies like the Farm Service Agency exist, they are currently need improvement and adjustments. Therefore, it is necessary that new programs like the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program continue to be introduced, and bills like Beginning Farmer and Rancher Opportunity Act continue to be passed. For this to happen, the first requirement is public interest. As people begin to be more aware of agriculture in America, they can begin to understand the issues of the new farmer. Educational programs for children are critical to this collective understanding, as well as visibility in the adult community. Public interest and political support actively invested in the new farmer is an investment in the next generation of agriculture. Given the tools and the land they so desperately need, the new generation of farmers will grow a more sustainable America.